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## THE AMERICAN IDEAL OF THE KINDERGARTEN<sup>1</sup> MOTIVE FOR WORK

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Perhaps no educational department is so widely known and so pronouncedly misunderstood as to its motive as the kindergarten. Not only may this be said of its patrons, fond and often ignorant mothers at all levels of the social strata; but it is true to an enormous and, at first glance, surprising extent of educators themselves. This gross general misconception is due probably to the fact that for a long time the kindergarten was set apart from the general scheme of education. There were the primary, grammar, and high schools, and, as a climax to the series, if one went on, the university. The kindergarten was a side issue—a little play or toy school—in the narrowest sense of the word play—sometimes functioning, sometimes not, always an extra, never an essential, always a special type, or variation, never a universally recognized and accepted form of education. This being the case, the kindergarten as a factor in child-development has not been seriously considered. Therefore its motive has not been seriously studied by educators at large. Here and there, to be sure, we find most careful investigators, many of whom are able writers, so that we in America now possess, aside from the contributions furnished by other countries, a kindergarten literature of our own of no mean quality; but comparatively few people have been inclined to read these publications, and a still smaller number have felt the necessity for doing so. Kindergartners themselves are partially responsible for this apathy. Their sunny child gardens were filled for long years, notwithstanding the protests of many able leaders, with ignorant, poorly paid women, who, dazzled by the bright colors and bewildered by the vast mass of novel material thrust upon them, flitted hither and thither among the little people and their

<sup>1</sup> Paper read at the meeting of the N. E. A., July, 1907.

"culture stuff" like giddy butterflies, and displayed little more reason while flitting than these care-free flower-lovers.

But all this is ancient history; the kindergarten has found its place in the educational scheme, and though there are striking exceptions, kindergartners today, as a rule, understand, at least as well as other teachers understand theirs, the problems set them. Nevertheless, for the reasons just stated, they by no means have as yet succeeded in making "the people" understand.

The great problem of the kindergartner is not different in the main from that of other educators. Can any clearer statement be made of it than the following by Professor Edward L. Thorndike in his *Educational Psychology*?

The work of education is:

1. To supply the needs of the brain's healthy growth and to remove physiological impediments to it.
2. To provide stimuli to desirable mental variations and to withhold stimuli from the undesirable.
3. To make the outcome of desirable activities pleasurable and to inhibit their opposites by discomfort.

The three chief practical problems of education would thus be those of hygiene, of opportunity, and of incentive and deterrents.

The conscientious teacher often asks herself, "How can I best deal with the child at this period of his life in order that it may yield its fullest and richest value?" It follows logically that an impoverished life at one period means a weakened life at the next, and conversely. The argument, often advanced, that a child entering the primary school directly from the home does brilliant work and advances rapidly through the primary and grammar grades is no criticism at all upon the kindergarten. Who can say how wonderful might have been his proficiency or how rapid his development had he been subject to kindergarten stimuli? The other thesis, that the kindergarten child does not always take to primary-school methods with ease and docility is likewise challengeable. The ease with which he does take to them may be due largely to his kindergarten life; or, we might ask, are the primary-school methods always those that well-developed six-year-olds find interesting and profitable?

The kindergarten, as well as the other departments of education, has been and is in progressive evolution. The intelligent

kindergartner no longer follows blindly the theories of Froebel or Pestalozzi, any more than does the intelligent primary teacher depend altogether for guidance, as she did very generally not many years ago, upon the average accumulated experience of her predecessors. The kindergartner no longer points with pride, as she sometimes used to, to the results obtained in various forms of handwork, e. g., pricking patterns upon cardboard, any more than the thoughtful teacher in the grades congratulates herself upon the ability of her pupils to state certain facts in history, arithmetic, or grammar.

The emphasis today in education is an emphasis upon interest in what is worth knowing and zeal in its pursuit, rather than upon the accomplishment of a finished amount of work, mental or physical, or even than upon the ability to perform the work. We care less for what a man knows than for what he is desirous of knowing, less for what he can do than for his attitude toward work. The life of the educated man is a life of voluntary action in a right direction. It is the function of the school to provide, so far as possible, the proper stimuli and deterrents to make not only possible, but strongly probable, such life.

Psychology, sociology, ethics, as well as the long-established sciences, are gradually furnishing us with certain data upon which we formulate educational principles. The kindergartner in common with other educators eagerly seeks for these data. She knows that the mind of the little child is analogous to that of the adult; the two are similar but not alike. She learns as much as possible about the make-up and functioning of her own mind. She tries to apply this knowledge to the study of the child-mind. She studies the laws of society and tries to understand what is meant by a good citizen. She learns to discriminate finely between forms of right and wrong action, and turns to various sciences to see what they have to teach her of precision, accuracy, patience, conditions of experiment, truth. And then she turns again to her kindergarten to know as much as is possible of the physical and mental condition of each child under her direction, to study inherited traits and home environment, and with this knowledge to set about a work of definite and deliberate change to be wrought in each bit of humanity.

This is the self-constituted task of the professional-spirited kindergartner.

How does her work differ from that of other teachers? The work of the kindergartner is of a more positive nature. The child comes to her with less experience of the world of any kind. The influence of environment, good or bad, has not had time to change in any marked degree his original self. Action in any particular direction has not been continued long enough to become habit. Curiosity has not yet been killed or even very much curbed, neither has its field of operation been very wide or fertile. Imitation has not gone sufficiently far to become second-nature. Rivalry, emulation, courage, timidity, self-reliance, aggressiveness, selfishness, generosity, vanity, co-operation—no one of these tendencies has been given opportunities striking enough or often enough repeated to be classed as characteristic. In a word, the kindergarten child is more a bundle of material than of acquired tendencies. The kindergartner's problem is less complex than that of the child's later teachers. She has less to do with the breaking of habits, because, speaking broadly, we may say that no strong habits have been formed. She has much to do, however, with the formation of habits, and in providing opportunity for their proper development and exercise, she has a problem sufficiently important and difficult.

It is in the study of natural tendencies of individual children and their expression, in other words, in the study of children's motives and their direction into avenues of desirable work that her chief function lies. No teacher has so little exercise for repression, for the simple reason that there are fewer tendencies to suggest the method of repression; no teacher, perhaps, has so great a responsibility, for the simple reason that there are so many chances for wrong expression, bad habit-formation, undesirable work.

Any form of expression engaged in with zeal is work. Certain forms of what is commonly turned to play may very properly, according to this definition, be classed as work. This the writer understands; but the walls between play and work are so low and weak as constantly to need propping upon one side or the other, and the enormous gaps between the two fields

are so apparent that it seems absurd to try to draw any hard and fast line between the two. The kindergarten, e. g., far from being a mere play school, might far more properly be called a garden in which children work, and the work done in a kindergarten, in which selection of stimuli has been careful and direction of child-motive is wise, certainly compare favorably in value to that done during any period of equal time during the child's school life.

The selection of work-inspiring stimuli rests of course with the kindergartner. The motive for work is to be found in the child himself. Artificial incentives for work in the kindergarten are neither necessary nor advisable, and their employment with all teachers is too often due to lack of knowledge of how to use motives already in the child-mind.

Roughly, then, the method of procedure is blocked out; it is the same for all kindergartners. What truths, if any, have been discovered? How is the kindergarten child differentiated from children of a larger growth and from adults? The most noticeable trait, apparent even to the casual observer, is physical activity. The kindergarten child is predominantly active, as compared with others. He likes movement for its own sake, and truly the granting of opportunity of movement for its own sake would be a boon to many a child. But the wise kindergartner utilizes this natural motive for motion and makes of it a motive for work involving motion. She realizes that this movement ought to be self-directed to a great extent, that it must call for the exercise of the power of choice, that it must lead to production of some kind, that in its progress it must not interfere with the rights of others, that it must take the form of co-operation, that it must be of such a nature and continue for such a time as to further, never to hinder, healthy, normal, physical development. Games, then, are not played for mere amusement; songs are not sung for entertainment. Handwork is not provided merely to keep the child busy, nor, on the other hand, for the finished production which may follow. Pictures are not drawn to serve as specimens of childish art. The work in the mind of the kindergartner to be wrought is real work, work that carries with it power and dignity, work that is thoroughly enjoyed,

and the motive for it she finds in the child, in irrepressible movement.

But this tendency to irrepressible movement is not confined to his physical nature. His mind, as is ours, is in a constant state of flux. The mind of the young child, however, is in a special or unique state, that of passive attention. If he be a normal human being of four or five years he must attend to the sights, sounds, and other stimuli offered by the outside world. He is more of an animal than he will be later. The animal who refuses thus to attend fails to survive. The child who is unable thus to attend is abnormal, unfit. Yet these brief periods are at the same time periods of interest, and if the proper stimuli be provided, are periods of great and valuable mental growth. The motive for work in this case is simply an overpowering tendency to be constantly in a peculiar state of mental activity. The work is the change that goes on in the child's mental complex during these rapidly passing periods, under the influence of carefully directed stimuli. The motive for work then is again irrepressible movement, but in this case mental movement.

Much that this new and strange world brings to the child he is not ready to receive. It bears no content, carries with it no meaning, but there are certain tendencies either natural or easily and early acquired that almost never fail to appeal to him. Among these is the inclination to collect things, a form of activity both mental and physical. Given the proper stimuli, i. e., the one that appeals to the child as an individual, and this tendency to collect may result in work of huge proportions. If the tendency, as frequently happens, be merely the collection of any objects whatsoever, simply the gathering of material, then it is the kindergartner's privilege and duty to provide material of educative value or to lead the child to find it for himself. The child thus directed becomes a changed being, simply through the utilization of his motive for work, which was a crude, uncultivated restlessness forcing him to act in a certain ill-defined but positive way.

Lacking almost entirely the knowledge and content of words it is no wonder that the child's ideas are largely composed of symbols of a different kind. They seek for expression of their

ideas, however, quite as eagerly as the children of a larger growth, but more emphatically than they in the form of dramatization. It is only through their bodies that they can make themselves clearly understood. It is only through the bodily actions of others that they are fully able to understand them. The same sort of irrepressible energy that impels them almost constantly merely to move, impels them frequently to move in living pictures. Life is a medley of disconnected incidents. The desire to set forth the incidents experienced is self-forceful. Surely it is not necessary to point out how eagerly the kindergartner seizes upon this tendency to accomplish work. The child in the kindergarten who has been permitted to work with ideas in this way knows far better how to work with them in a more abstract form when he is ready to step forth into the larger world of word ideas. Who shall say which form of work is the more valuable in bringing about desirable change? In fact, the change wrought in a child's mental and ethical nature by work done in a wisely selected drama can hardly be estimated, and its value can hardly be overestimated. Again we find the motive for work emanating from the child himself. Not only is the kindergarten child interested in his own action and that of his fellows, but all that moves holds him a willing captive. He unconsciously stretches forth his hands to the flying bird, imitates the motion of the running horse, or follows to its hiding-place the shy rabbit. All living, moving things wield a power over him. It is not that he wishes to attend; he must attend. And so the kindergarten is filled with live animals; the living conditions of which are as nearly as possible like those of their free brothers, or, better still, the children and animals live together in a veritable out-of-door kindergarten—permissible in many parts of our country—and are taken frequently from their own little garden out into the larger one of the adjoining bit of world. Who can ever hope to trace the changes in brain-cell patterns that must result? The motive supplied by the child himself, intense active interest in living, moving animals, the kindergartner obtains, in addition to actual knowledge of animal life, increased sympathy, respect, pity, tenderness, love for, and actual care of, animals involving



various forms of mental and physical work. The motive for work was once more child-born.

Sometimes two tendencies—two motives of action or work of opposite types—are made to co-operate admirably. There is in all animals—and the human being is no exception—the instinct for self-preservation expressing itself often in young children in a kind of aggressive self-defense exercised without necessary provocation. We say the child likes to fight. There is also prominent in most children the parental or protective trait, as shown in love and care of babies, dolls, animals, Teddy bears, etc. The desire to fight also can certainly be traced to this origin. The kindergartner simply directs the tendency into its proper channel. The kindergarten child who involuntarily flushes and clinches his small fists, when he sees an animal cruelly hurt or a weak child cruelly teased, is on the highroad to citizenship. The world needs fighters of this sort, and the motive for this form of the world's work does not have to be artificially supplied.

It is the tendency to imitate that leads a child to wish to do what he finds others doing. This is, obviously, one of the most fruitful sources of education. The amount of hard work accomplished through imitation among children is enormous. The kindergartner skilfully turns the motive for work of mere imitation into desire for co-operative work where imitation is more or less called into play.

But why multiply instances? The purpose of this paper has been accomplished if the following points have been made clear:

1. The kindergarten has a recognized place in the scheme of education.

2. It is in a state of progressive evolution.

3. Its general problem is not radically different from that of other educators.

4. It deals with children at a time when they are in a peculiar state of mental condition.

5. Its function, like that of other departments of education, is to supply desirable forms of work.

6. The motives for this work are to be found in certain powerful tendencies in the child himself.